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SUBJECT: IVLP DEBRIEF OFFERS NEW INSIGHT ON VIETNAM'S EDUCATION

REFORM STRUGGLES

REF: A. A) 08 HANOI 1038: DEPUTY SECRETARY NEGROPONTE'S SEPTEMBER 11, 2008 MEETING WITH VIETNAMESE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING NGUYEN THIEN NHAN

[1](#)B. B) 08 HANOI 463: EDUCATION SCENE SETTER: U.S. MISSION EDUCATION INITIATIVES TO SHAPE VIETNAM'S FUTURE

Summary

[1](#)1. With a massively flawed education system continuing to stand between Vietnam and its development goals, the debriefing of two participants in the International Visitors Leadership Program (IVLP) on Elementary and Secondary Education issues shed new light on the challenges faced by Vietnam's educators. While the focus of the Ministry of Education and Training has generally been on higher education reform, these administrators made a compelling case that without equally great attention to the country's K-12 students and educators, Vietnam's restructuring will ultimately fail to meet its goals of having a competitive and educated population. The participants spoke excitedly about American educational resources, buy-in by parents and governmental organizations, and professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators, while speaking with near despair about the educational situation in Vietnam. End summary.

Background

[1](#)2. Ms. Le Thi Anh Dao, Deputy Head of the High School Administration Section at the Thua Thien-Hue Department of Education and Training (DOET), and Mr. Huynh Cong Dam, International Relations Manager at the Ho Chi Minh City DOET, joined 20 other participants from around the world for this program, which took place February 3-27. The group visited Washington, D.C.; Salt Lake City, Utah; Kansas, Missouri; and Louisville, Kentucky. They also broke into smaller groups, with Ms. Dao traveling to Pensacola, Florida, and Mr. Dam visiting Corpus Christi, Texas. During the program, participants had a chance to visit charter schools, transition schools for the disabled, volunteer programs such as Teach 4 America, and parent-teacher association meetings, as well as many other types of schools and programs.

Closing the Door to Higher Education?

[1](#)3. Mr. Dam was most critical of the Vietnamese education system when he discussed the mixed messages sent by the lack of slots at the nation's public colleges and universities. According to Mr. Dam, because public universities have spaces for only about

16% of the students who sit for the national entrance examinations (Ref B), the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has made the Vietnamese textbooks and curriculum increasingly tougher, to the point of being "too difficult for teachers and students to follow". To ensure that universities don't exceed their low recruiting goals, "the entrance examination must be written so that 80% of the students will fail." The goal of the K-12 teaching and testing system is thus not to prepare students for college or a professional career, but to weed out all but the top students. (Comment: In a meeting with Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education and Training Nguyen Thien Nhan stated that Vietnam did not plan to open any new public universities. While private universities remain an option in Vietnam, they are generally seen as of inferior quality. End comment.)

¶4. Ms. Dao struck a somewhat more hopeful note, praising U.S. programs that allow high school students to take a small number of classes for college credit. She has suggested to her boss that Thua Tien-Hue's education department institute a similar partnership with some of the area's top-notch universities.

If You Thought Students Were Discouraged, Look at the
Administrators

¶5. Despite this Confucian culture's claims to venerate teachers, financial rewards for teachers and administrators are appalling -- and only get worse as one moves up in the system. As Mr. Dam noted, while DOET "rewards" the best and brightest teachers by asking them to take an administrative position in the Department, their salaries and bonuses are cut by about half once they leave the classroom. Many teachers thus refuse the

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promotion, and those who do accept often return two or three years later to beg DOET to allow them to return to the classroom so that they can earn a decent living. For example, upon accepting his promotion, Mr. Dam's salary package went from four million VND (\$242 USD) per month as a teacher to two million (\$121) as an administrator.

¶6. Both participants felt that it was imperative to reward teachers and administrators with professional development and continuing education opportunities. Mr. Dam has recommended to DOET that every official holding the rank of assistant principal and above be required to study English and to take the TOEFL. Ms. Dao was especially impressed with her meeting at the National Association of Elementary and Secondary School Principals and is working with her department to develop a training course that would cover management principles, classroom organization, and other useful topics.

The Power of Posters

¶7. In addition to salary restrictions, Vietnamese classes face shortages of nearly every imaginable resource. Both participants stated that classrooms hold an average of 45-50 students; in

fact, Ms. Dao said that she was disappointed in American class sizes only because she wanted to "see how American teachers handled big classes." While she was happy for American students, she felt that, in this respect, the American system was so different that it did not offer lessons relevant to the Vietnamese experience. Ms. Dao also thought that it was impressive that American teachers generally had their own classroom, where they could grade papers and prepare for lessons during free periods. Due to infrastructure shortages, Vietnamese teachers must move from class to class, with little space of their own when not teaching. Again, while Ms. Dao noticed the big difference this made in curriculum development and work comfort, she was not optimistic that Vietnam would ever have enough educational space to make such a change likely.

18. Of all Mr. Dam's impressions, perhaps the most striking was his deep admiration of the simple educational resources available to American students. He cited seeing one poster showing the lyrics of the U.S. national anthem, explaining that Vietnamese teachers who wanted a similar teaching tool would have to invest their own unpaid time and money and make it themselves. He added "An American teacher can just buy it!" He repeatedly stressed the difference that such tools make in brightening a classroom and "creating a real learning environment."

Buy-in vs. Lip Service

19. Throughout our debriefing sessions, the refrain of "buy-in" sounded repeatedly. Both Ms. Dao and Mr. Dam were especially impressed with the level of parental involvement they noticed during their visit. Mr. Dam was impressed by the fiscally responsible Parent-Teacher Associations he saw in the United States, in which members must volunteer a set number of hours and the board must submit a monthly financial report. Both talked excitedly about the large number of parents who volunteered at U.S. schools and noted that such programs had the dual advantage of reducing teacher workloads and allowing parents to be involved in their children's education.

110. Mr. Dam paid a special compliment to the USG, when he discussed an American student he saw taking an online science quiz on a NASA educational website. Noting that "many (USG) organizations set up websites to introduce themselves, but also create pages for students and teachers," he said that "this shows the government's emphasis on education." (Comment: This stands in clear difference from Vietnamese government sites, which often fail to present clear information to adults, let

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alone explain their mission to students and children. End comment.)

A Tough Road Ahead

111. Both participants' moods wavered between admiration of the U.S. system and pessimism that the innovative strategies they saw would never work in Vietnam. Ms. Dao also wished they had seen some "normal" schools, because although she admired the innovations she saw, she would have liked to talk to administrators at struggling schools whose problems were more like her own. Still, both participants returned with cautious optimism that some changes could indeed be implemented. Vietnam may not soon become an educational rival to the United States, but the efforts of these young and energetic officials will ensure that Vietnam's primary students have effective advocates

who are trying to make things better.
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